

82 / WAX & GOLD

*565 leisurely style of life of his social superiors. He would prefer, if he could but
461 acquire the necessary servants and corvée labor, to "cause to plow" (*de-brasa*)
rather than to plow (*drasa*) himself.

*565 If, in sketching the Amhara peasant's conception of the "good life," one
461 moves from the sphere of goals to that of norms and values, one may say that
181 while work as such is not conceived as an absolute value, the work of plowing
597 one's land is regarded as a primary moral responsibility. The peasant's obligations
183 toward his land extend beyond working it, moreover. At the local level
[423] he is supposed to keep it within his family, and should be ready to defend his
rights to land use against all comers. At the national level he should help to
keep the land "free"; that is, out of the hands of all foreigners.

*565 Obligations toward the deity are mostly of a ritual nature. Observing the
78 fasts and avoiding forbidden foods are perhaps most important of all. It is also
181 important to wear the symbol of the Ethiopian Christian, the *māṣab*, a simple
183 neckcord often holding a wrought silver cross. The church should be visited
[423] and heavy work avoided on the appropriate holy days. Prayers should not be
[201] neglected. When one passes by a church he should bow three times; when he
enters a church compound he should "greet" the ark by kissing some stone or
pole of the church building.

*565 The Amhara's ideal of Christian piety does, however, include certain good
597 works which should be carried out in order to gain God's favor—giving alms
181 to the indigent, visiting the sick or the prisoner, and aiding the wayfarer (who
183 is referred to as a "guest of God"). But such injunctions play a slight part in
*565 the Amhara's rhetoric of social morality when compared to his extensive code
597 of "shames," or *nawr*. Stealing and breaking the fasts are among the very
673 worst *nawr*. Other *nawr* include murder without good reason or by a shame-
181 ful means like poison; adultery; insulting or not showing proper respect to-
183 ward others; failing to observe the conventions concerning engagement and
marriage; failing to revenge offenses; and gossiping about others and thereby
stirring up trouble. Though the sense of being shamed before God provides
• [626] some measure of internal self-control in these matters, the Amhara peasant
avoids immoral acts primarily for fear of being the victim of what others will
say (*yelugnā*), so that he will not be "seized by shame" (*kāṣṣat*) or suffer
humiliation (*wardat*). His prime moral concern is not to be caught in the act
of committing some *nawr*.

*565 Positive moral obligations to persons outside the circle of close ones are thus
59 kept to a minimum. Following the conventions of respect toward superiors
181 and peers is all that is enjoined. The good life for the Amhara peasant is lived
183 within a minimal, Hobbesian order. The ideal neighbor is defined as one
who does not touch others (*saw aynaḥām*). He does not touch another's land,
wife, money, or personal feelings.

*565 Among *samad*, however, a much warmer ideal of human relations obtains.

597
602
597
181
183

233 / *Orality and Leadership*

phenomena, traits inherited from earlier traditions and retained through inertia, and that no psychological processes need be invoked in describing them. But this argument fails to explain why, in view of the harmful physical and political consequences of their excessive fasting, the Amhara should have developed in the direction of increasing rather than alleviating their fasting burden. For Abyssinia's commitment to fasting was well known by her enemies, and used to her disadvantage: Ahmad Grifi took advantage of the country's weakness during Lent to launch his attacks at that time year after year, and the Galla hordes who succeeded him did likewise. The argument also fails to explain why the taboos on pork and tobacco, and the fasting prescriptions, should have been pushed to the forefront of Amhara Christian consciousness. For observance of these mores is considered the very crux of Christianity by traditional Amhara. Amhara often refer to fasting as the most important part of their religion. If a person fails to fast, his relatives are technically absolved from the duty of providing memorial feasts for him when he dies; let his soul wander in darkness! Fasting more than anything else protects them from the devil and enhances the likelihood of their entering paradise. 121 784 785 195 121 785 784 155 779 626 626

Apart from their adherence to these cultural norms, moreover, the Amhara also manifest anxiety regarding oral gratification at the purely psychological level. There is, on the one hand, a constant undertone of concern among Amhara about getting enough to eat, even under favorable agricultural conditions. On the other hand, there is a good deal of concern about the consequences of eating too much. There is much worry among the Amhara about the dangers of excessive eating at the conclusion of periods of fasting. There is also the fear that if one indulges in eating and drinking he may become uncontrollably hostile, a fear expressed in the previously mentioned notion of *jegäbaññä*. These and other forms of anxiety about oral gratification are expressed in a number of folk tales, in which eating, drinking, singing, talking, or simply opening one's mouth result in such misfortunes as sickness, loss of property, and death.²⁰ A similar theme appears in the epic *Glory of Kings*: the Queen of Sheba, in satisfying her thirst by drinking from a goblet which King Solomon had placed in her bedroom, thereby forfeited her right to immunity from his amorous desires and was obliged to yield to his embrace. 152 155 261 828

Ambivalence regarding oral aggressiveness, finally, may be discerned in the Amhara's anxiety about being eaten, an anxiety which should probably be interpreted as an externalization of unacceptable oral-sadistic impulses. Traditional Amhara have a morbid fear of being "eaten" by those with the evil eye, *budä* and *jayb*, men who are believed to destroy their victim by invisibly sucking his blood. It is largely because of this fear that children are kept away from strangers. Similar projections appear in connection with other well-known figures in Amhara culture. Another fearful object is the *chirdä*, a giant 155 152 754 609 776

Political and Military Organization (prior to 1942)

- *121 The Amhara political system was based, as has been suggested, on an
571 interlocking hierarchy of patron-client relationships. Given the tremendous
importance of domination and deference in such relationships, the demands
made upon an inferior by his superior seem virtually unlimited. Nevertheless,
[642] the system as a whole was characterized by a high degree of decentralization
and laissez faire, and there were safeguards for protecting the rights of
individuals at all levels.
- *121 The basic dimension of constraint concerned the imposition of taxes of
651 various sorts. The original meaning of the verb "to rule" in Amharic (*sag-*
641 *gasa*) is "to collect tribute"; and this was the primary activity of rulers at
all levels. As we have seen, provincial rulers had to deliver an annual tribute
to their overlords and the latter a tribute to the monarch; local rulers, in
turn, obtained income from the labors of peasants and artisans, exacting both
land taxes and tithes. Peasants working land which had been granted to a
noble or church as *gult* were obliged to hand over the full produce of half
their land to the landlords. In addition to paying these periodically collected
taxes, the peasants were liable to have their stores confiscated when required
to billet soldiers or subjected to raids by passing armies.
- [166] The peasants were further required to furnish a certain amount of *corvée*
labor each month to their rulers and landlords. This might be used for purely
personal projects, like cultivating the lord's estates, or for quasi-public ones,
such as constructing a new church building. There was, finally, the obligation
*121 for every adult male who was not a member of the clergy to take up arms
641 under his local lord whenever a levy was proclaimed. Those who did not
[101] respond to such a call were subject to fines or other punishment as well as the
[681] barbs of public opinion.
- *121 The military organization of the Amhara was highly individualistic. Un-
701 like the Galla, the Amhara did not provide for the collective training of their
[102] warriors. Each man was left to learn how to fight by himself and to provide
his own equipment. A man could become a "career" soldier when he came
[114] of age simply by purchasing a shield; or he might prevail upon an estab-
lished lord to arm him temporarily, with the promise of returning the
equipment should he leave that lord's service. Similarly, there were no col-
[105] lective provisions for the supply of troops. Each man was left to fend for
himself, drawing upon the supply of grain he brought along and what-
ever booty he could acquire on the warpath; the preparation of his food was
left to the wife or servant who accompanied him to battle.
- *121 The conduct of a military operation exhibited a minimum of external
701 constraint and discipline. Chains of command existed with respect to the
726 general direction of troop movements, and the camping pattern was highly